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# The Significance of Seeking Truth in Art

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# **The Significance of Seeking Truth In Art**

**A Thesis submitted to the Visual Arts Faculty in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirement for the Masters of Art Degree in the Fine Arts**

**By**

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## **Introduction**

The artwork that I create today stems from years of creating art at home, in school and the community. In 2009 I began creating my first photographic collage on canvas. This first piece was a combination of my family history, the American society in a style which is an outgrowth of the various cultures that use circles, mandalas and geometric designs in their art. I began by photographing a tree with a double trunk that stood in the yard of my childhood home. I photographed this tree during the winter when it was dark and bare. It was in the evening and the trunk of the tree cast a long shadow in the snow. What made this tree significant is that it represented how I felt. The two trunks looked like arms reaching up and outward while the shadows appeared to be legs. There was no head or shoulders, just the ever- changing sky. Each limb seemed to be reaching out to a different continent. One arm reached to American, the other Europe and the legs were in South America and Africa. My body remained, headless, in the Ocean as if it didn't really belong in any culture. This piece began as a 5' X 6' piece of canvas that I nailed on the wall. I drew the tree and its shadow with an over painting of a mandala. Within the designs of the mandala I shaped and glued photos of my family, our rural community and the sky. When I put all the pieces together, I came to the conclusion that I was isolated from a world of turmoil. My parents intentionally moved us away from Chicago in order to allow us to be free from the pressures of urban society. My grandfather was one of the first African

American to become a mailman in Morgan Park, Chicago during the 1940's. He could only speak fluent French and a dialect of English. My Grandfather was not considered Black in the African American community because he was a Cajun/Creole from New Orleans. During that time you were called "mixed" or "half and half." For this very reason, my mother was threatened, bullied and knocked down a flight of stairs at Shoop Elementary School. Being a mixture of various cultures and races during the 60's and 70's meant that you grew up with the media and school topics that were filled with social unrest. It also meant that we absorbed a variety of history and cultural studies of our ancestors. We were exposed to many languages, traditions, food and daily living of various cultures. This was a time when there was constant media coverage highlighting social unrest. Having older siblings meant that I was exposed to various protest groups. I lived through the Women's Liberation Movement and the Black Panther Party/Militant movements with our older family members. The Women's Liberation Movement had the basic premise that art could influence social change. Everyone seemed to be fighting for "equality." Perrone, (1997)"Transfigurations" emphasizes, the reliance on "consciousness raising" introduced through autobiography as a veritable source for visual production; it also contradicted the "unconscious" or "random" visual selection process cherished by so many Modernist creative theories. This environment had a great impact in how I saw the world and how I created art. For me, Art became the method of expression that had an open, unbound and unfinished "limitlessness." In my world, society was not "fixed" or in order. I imagined a place that could reach beyond the individual, striving for eternal connection. My worked

developed into a form of abstracted realism. Today, I continuously use shapes and colored designs to indicate energy or emotion that cannot otherwise be expressed.

## **Background**

One of my main objectives in creating art is to emphasize the importance of inner human development and expression of higher being as opposed to reactionary processes that culminate into an art form. It is not to say that my work never includes the challenges of human social deficiencies. On the contrary, my work may touch upon an experience, such as the month I spent in the hospital nearly losing a child three months before her due date or the eight days of agony when my ex-husband took my daughter. The collages that depict the images of that time are about overcoming and survival. Throughout the period of researching various schools and cultures of philosophy, my work evolved from painting to photography and finally to collage. I placed emphasis on the discovery of a neutral perspective or point of view. My art, my research and my life have blended into a unified assemblage of experiential expression. What is human consciousness and how do we express feelings, thoughts and concepts? What does it mean to love or hate and how do these feelings affect our environment?

This text is an attempt to make sense of the feelings of oneness with all forms of life that become the underlying subject of my artwork. It is the search for the essence of the source of creation and the answer to my feelings of fragmentation and being torn between cultures. I have acquired a photographic record of the process of collecting images, a

series of drawings and essays, notes and journal entries of the search to uncover and discover who we are and how I fit in to this experience called life.

In 1993 after a near death experience, I began sketching and painting spirals and spirits emerging from streams of light. Everything came from a universal essence, Soul.

Everything is an expression of Soul beyond my vocabulary but captured with a brush. The 60's were a time of "soul searching, social change and unrest, and an overall anti-traditional attitude throughout America. We were in a whirlwind of controversy. Everyone had a voice. Everyone seemed to have something to protest. We talked about leaders being shot, political candidates and social issues on the playground in third and fourth grade. This is where my art began.

### ***Literature Review***

My work is about the "Essence of Us" based on my experience and what I have learned from other like-minded individuals. It is simply the expression of the search for truth.

The question I ask when creating art is, – How do we, as artists, create, and express ourselves truthfully, regardless of the world around us? As I study excerpts of the work of Leo Tolstoy's essay, "*What is Art?*" published in 1896, I can't help but get the feeling that his internal quest was much more important to him than his literary work. Van Camp (1997) quotes Tolstoy, Chapter five excerpt #1. Tolstoy writes, "***In order correctly to define art, it is necessary, first of all, to cease to consider it as a means to pleasure and to consider it as one of the conditions of human life. Viewing it in this way we cannot fail to observe***

*that art is one of the means of intercourse between man and man.*" In excerpt #17 Tolstoy goes on to say that *"We are accustomed to understand art to be only what we hear and see in theaters, concerts, and exhibitions, together with buildings, statues, poems, novels....But all this is but the smallest part of the art by which we communicate with each other in life. All human life is filled with works of art of every kind- from cradlesong, jest, mimicry, the ornamentation of houses, dress, and utensils, up to church services, buildings, monuments, and triumphal processions. It is all artistic activity. So that by art, in the limited sense of the word, we do not mean all human activity transmitting feelings, but only that part which we for some reason select from it and to which we attach special importance."* Is this what we have done? Have we, as a society, attached special importance to a certain group of people and a particular form of art? Have we become more inclusive of all human activity from all people? Are we focusing on a universal truth? During the course of my research I discover the update to the Women's Art movement and there is evidence that all people have been included to some degree or another. This has been a life long challenge for me and other artists as well. I turn to the non-fiction magnum opus of Leo Tolstoy, titled, "The Kingdom of God Is Within You" which was first published in Germany in 1894, after being banned in his home country of Russia. In Garnett, C (1894), Redirected from The Kingdom of God is Within You, it states that "Tolstoy sought to separate Orthodox Russian Christianity, which was merged with the state, from what he believed was the true message of Jesus Christ, as contained in the Gospels, specifically the Sermon on the Mount." Tolstoy was an advocate of non-violent social change. Does this sound familiar? How long has this been a major

human endeavor? The influence of “likeminded” people is what drives me to create and search and continue to create. Graduate school required me to define and refine the process of creating art.

## **Artist Research**

As a source of inspiration, I began exploring the work of Betye Saar. Saar is an African-Irish American who was born in Pasadena California in 1926. Her work is fascinating in that she produces altars that are autobiographical in nature. She studied her ancestral history in 1974 while visiting Haiti, Mexico and Africa. She uses her childhood experiences with clairvoyance, objects from her travels around the world and occult and pagan rituals when producing altars. My interest in Betye Saar stems from her use of objects in assemblage work. From the National Visionary Leadership Project, Oral History Archive, in the Biography of Betty Saar, the excerpt states that, “ Over the last three decades Saar’s work has focused on remembering the past, breaking down social stereotypes, countering the myriad forms of oppression, delving deeper into mysticism and ritual and synthesizing cross cultural symbols.” From the online resource [www.collegeart.org/awards/cwa2004](http://www.collegeart.org/awards/cwa2004), “In an interview with curator Robert Barrett in the catalogue for her exhibition, **Betye Saar : Secret Heart**, at the Fresno Art Museum in California in 1993, Saar recalled, “My creative impulse to make art came after college. The stimulus to become an artist came primarily from my family experiences.” In that respect, the work of Betye Saar helped me find direction and focus.



***Sybille Peretti – Glass sculpture, painting – mixed media artist***

When I look at the work of Sibylle Peretti, what stands out are the intense images of children in nature and the reviews. For example the review by D. Eric Bookhardt (2009) [www.gambit.bestofneworleans.com](http://www.gambit.bestofneworleans.com) Nov. 02 states, "Like a parallel universe, the Peretti-world is part dream and part fairy tale, but it also resonates with a certain reality we sense without knowing exactly what it is, at least not at first." The mystery and appeal of her work shows that she has found success in expressing various levels of consciousness. In the body of work called "SILENT CHILDREN SERIES" is described as follows, "Working with the premise of the unconscious of dreaming mind as the last refuge of nature in the world of man, Peretti depicts children removed from any social environment and places them in a diaphanous, dreamy world of her own making." When viewing these 40 pieces of art, I feel captivated and connected with the reference to another dimension of human existence. The work I create is similar in theme and in nature with the foggy, dreamy, blurred or glazed over imagery. "GIRL FEEDING DEER," "LISTEN TO THE BEES," AND SILENT SPRINGS," (the face page of Heller Gallery) are human subjects, and children just as much of the body of work that I am preparing for my show. They are different in that I photograph or draw images in a realistic setting and then paint over the environment to show the existence of a transition between the reality that we see and the which is invisible. My subjects may be alone or with other people. Some images are altered in Photoshop and merged like a double exposure or covered with a veil of paint or other transparent medium in the form of a collage.

The most fascinating discovery in Peretti's work is the similarity in the expressions on the faces of her subjects. Many times I capture the same expression in photograph or in drawing. The idea is to express the disconnectedness of a most difficult, traumatic experience in life. To survive death of a loved one or a near death experience that you can recall, to endure a long, challenging recovery from an illness is what has made me consider how I depict the human figure regardless of the setting. I selected a picture of my mother and grandparents to scan and reuse that shows them sitting on the porch. My grandmother is younger than I am, about 47 or 48, my mother has just had my older sister (seven years older) and you can see the profile of her stomach and the beginnings of her "after having children body." The women wear aprons and dresses and are a traditional depiction of life in the 50's. The photo-composite of my mother called, "A Lost Era is part of this collage. She is shown at a glass table that has a cup of tea and a pot on it, sheer curtains behind and within the curtains are the transparent images of her high school, the pier where she dove off as a teen, the steps near "Café Du Monde" in New Orleans where she drank coffee and the one room school house near our house in the country where she still resides at the age of 88. My father, grandfather and her first cousin, Uncle Dave, built that house. Rather than show all images in a dream like environment, my work progresses from familiar, autobiographical environments and artifacts similar to Betye Saar the gradually abstracted backgrounds of Sybille Peretti.

Peretti was born in Mulheim a der Ruhr, Germany in 1964. She trained as a Glass designer in 1984 and studied at the Academy for Fine Arts in Cologne, Germany from 1987 to 1993.

Peretti trained as an artist at the age of 20. In her biography, she states, "In my work I explore the lack of harmony between human beings and nature and our inability to become one with the natural world. My sculptures and paintings exemplify the tension between beauty and disease, intimacy and distance, innocence and knowledge." My work is similar in subject but also includes the experience of farmer/factory worker-daughter, wife, mother and art teacher who sees the overlapping elements in all forms of life. In the study of world cultures, I refer to the work of Edith Turner, anthropologist, who studied cultures around the world. Her field work in Zambia, Africa, Inupiat, Alaska and Rural Northern Ireland, who followed the life path of women in their spiritual experiences. Just as we use the snake in the symbol for medicine today, the roots are traced to the women of these cultures. The medicine wheel symbols of Native American people can be found all over northern United States, southern Canada, South Dakota, Wyoming, Montana, Alberta and Saskatchewan. I have an old black and white photograph of a child standing in an open field in Saskatchewan, Canada. This is part of a collage that is blended with Native American images that I took at a Pow Wow in Peotone, Illinois last February. This collage is the experience of the overlapping of cultures and the mixing of people in America. I try to show the duality of life. I have lived it and learned of it through my family history. I eventually began to use photography to capture images of my nieces and nephews, great nieces and nephews because the family expanded faster than anyone could hope to paint. It began when my cousins' son, age three, had to have surgery for a bulged spinal cord that can only be traced back to Ireland during the time of the potato famine. There were cousins born with fair skin, light eyes, freckles and red or blond hair. But no one ever had to have any surgery of this sort. The doctors explained that both parents usually carry a

condition such as this genetically. The work of Peretti reminded me of this experience that shook the entire family. No one had ever had a sick child since my mothers' generation. (Heller Gallery, Peretti Exhibition 040508) states- "Peretti acknowledges that while childhood and a flower's bloom are fleeting, our draw to nature's mysteries, its power to heal and its potential for beauty are always tied to our own dreams and wishes and ultimately our survival." This excerpt from the gallery Bio and images is the most significant portion of Peretti that inspires me. Without even reading the statement, I could feel what she was trying to convey.

### ***Magdalena Abakanowicz – Sculpture – Painter***

In the site, [www.abakanowicz.art/marlboroughgallery.com](http://www.abakanowicz.art/marlboroughgallery.com) Abakanowicz gives meaning to the large group of headless, giant sculptures. In her current work, she describes her human figures as a group of humans that were banned from paradise to an unknown world, an unknown space. She explains how they tried to access power through raising stones and practicing rituals. Society developed and the stones became sculptures that glorified the leaders, gods, history and for decoration. Abakanowicz makes the connection between her sculptures and society today. Her work is about how we are unable to comprehend the state of the world we created. She emphasizes the history of man and the numerous times a powerful civilization falls and disappears leaving the monuments behind.

Magdalena Abakanowicz is an inspiration for my transition into sculpture. I am currently working on creating images in three-dimensional form, some human and others organic in nature. This study is the exploration of how to create the images from my dreams that are reaching, standing and moving off the canvas. I see a gallery that depicts this evolution of

the object as it leads the artist in the direction unknown and seemingly inevitable. When discussing an independent study with Prof. Carrie Ohm, she referred me to Abakanowicz. I have experimented with stiffened fabric, plaster (a student's entire body with clothes on that she could slip off before it dried); clay models of miniature shapes, rubber molds and plastic/ acrylic liquid poured into a hole and mask making. My current interest is in making half or one-sided humans of transparent fabric, with images behind (painted or photographed) or overlaying burlap, paper or plastic on a form with the photos covering the finished form.

## **PRESENTATION OF WORK**

My graduate work has been a series of experiences recorded in photography and paint. It is a combination of photography and paint, abstract and realism, dreams, visions and daily life that merge into a spiraling sense of timelessness. Throughout the past three years I retraced my steps through the places where I played as a child, where I learned about life as an adolescent and the experiences as an adult. Many painful memories were intertwined and overlapped by greater realizations as I grew and matured. Painting is a way of confronting the issues at hand. Photography helps me capture and store images for use at another time. While working on a particular project, I ask myself, what is it that I want to explore, convey or express. Sometimes I pick up my camera early in the morning or late at night in response to a dream, a conversation or a situation that seems to need investigation. Life experiences are merely opportunities to problem solve. Each day is but another change to figure out the puzzle of "being." If we can step back, remove the emotion and

analyze the day, we can put our thoughts on paper in the form of text, paper, canvas or some other form of expression. Just the same as one may write poetry or record dreams, the making of art is a means of documenting life.

The work completed during this graduate experience is a reflection of my “Human Consciousness” studies. Combining painting and photography on board enables me to capture images that are memories and bits of places that I go throughout the course of a day. Some of these places, which are new to me and others, I may revisit often or years later. While driving through Hyde Park in Chicago, I drove through many places near where I lived and raised my son. Much has changed, and more has not. He is now twenty-five years old. How do I paint the feeling of sending to his first day of school at the age of three? The bushes that we planted in the schoolyard are now as tall as I am. The previous owner has sold the school to someone else. The memories of rearing a child alone combined with all the trials of living are overlapped and merged into a composite of life. There is truly the cliché of bitter and sweet. Even more so, there is the fact of dual existence glaring me in the face. Without darkness, there was no light, or pleasure without pain, etc. Integrating photography and painting into a cohesive work of art has been the challenge. Before I could master the transition from sketch to final product, the images began to rise from the board into a photographic, mosaic relief. All I could do was flow with the process and ask for help as I navigated through uncharted territory. As I sat before a board that contained a painted form of a woman, she looked at me as I drew her face and seemed to sit up and attempt to stand as I came down the stairs one night. Toward the end of the summer, I created body forms from fabric and paper, and sketches of

abstract images as quickly as the images formed in my mind. This experience had a great impact on the painting and merging of photographs that had been prepared for the graduate show. As I worked on a particular piece, colors or shapes didn't seem to work out the way I envisioned. As a parallel to life experience, while preparing for the final requirements for graduation, nothing seemed to happen as planned. Events and experiences didn't seem to work out the way I envisioned.

Art has been an inner journey for me. It is a method of self-discovery and fulfillment. Beginning with contemporary culture in America, events and rituals surrounding water, I became interested in the symbolic meaning of water. How was water viewed or used in various cultures? How close are we to the realization of the existence of water as a means of survival? An explosion of metaphysical and philosophical avenues appeared as I developed the concepts for my work. The more I looked into philosophy and religion, the more it seemed that other cultures seemed to have a closer connection between life and death; dreams and reality; and the mind, body and spirit within humans. What started as a desire to learn painting techniques became an explosion of ideas and images that emerged at such a rate that required the use of photography. As I studied the histories of Asia, Africa and other ancient cultures I became aware that cultures where there is less government, commercial and technological interference, and the belief systems are closer to those of the original people. It has been evident that dreams tend to run parallel with what we know as reality. Since what is real to one individual varies based on his/her experiences, I became intrigued by Einstein's theory of relativity. I wondered if it also applied to consciousness, or awareness, perception and the ability to sort through the entire visual and invisible

stimulus in our society. How much do radiation, microwave and electricity affect our consciousness? Are we true to ourselves in this society or are we merely relying on the modern conveniences that provide comfort to the extent that we are able to skate through life and not benefit from the true meaning of existence? Has everything become toxic, cloned, bio engineered, fake or plastic? If we had the ability to see the invisible rays of the electromagnetic spectrum, what would they tell us? Does the increase in UV rays due to holes in the ozone affect what we think and who we are? What happens to the minds of people in countries such as the United States and Europe that are documented as using 80 to 85% of the world's resources? Are we so entitled that we have the right to bomb other countries that don't let us have their oil? Have we become so greedy that we actually destroyed our country like overeating destroys gallbladders and pancreases? How can we be true to art if we are not true to ourselves? It seems to be part of the ongoing process of life. This is but one small insignificant study in an ocean of eternal thought.

## **CONCLUSION**

The greatest discussion on creating art, remaining true to our craft and us occurred in Art 810 under the direction of Professor Javier Chavira. The debate he proposed evolved around the idea of "Art for Art's Sake." Do we create art as an expression of our internal drive or do we simply create art to sell? As we progressed throughout the course, we encountered numerous ideas, concepts, art forms, theories and experimental designs. We became a cohesive, supportive unit that remained fairly connected throughout the course of our studies. Throughout all of the research, papers, trials and errors, we somehow



ended with the idea that Art is not just for sale. It is, in fact a reflection of us. Some of us were forced to compromise and create art to simply finish the requirements. Most of us took our time, planned ahead and created work, as we were advised, to reflect the search truth within us.

For me being true to art is about respecting the history, the phenomena and the practice itself. More importantly, it is about being true to you. In the end I found that I love it all. My life experiences are the lessons that made me. I love the traditional and the contemporary, the black and the white, the African, Latin and the Caucasian. My life reads like a novel in which Monet marries Josephine Baker and has a son who marries the daughter of Picasso and Leontyne Price. Part of my family came to New Orleans the 1700's from Europe, part from Africa. Eventually they migrated to Chicago surviving the pressure of being accepted by neither whites nor blacks. One of my grandfathers settled in Printers row with many other immigrants. He could only speak French. It is history. I love it all. It is the stuff that makes me gravitate toward light and shadow. History is what pushed me to search deeper as I learned that every civilization before us, every empire around the globe including, China, Greece, India, Rome, South America and those that we have no evidence of their existence, has fallen.

In the end I had to roam through streets and fields to sketch and shoot pictures, sit in front of a Mac screen and select photographs, stand in front of a board and paint a background, hoping that in the process of it all, I might learn something about myself. If art is life in terms of the writings of Tolstoy, then this whole educational process has been about the discovery and the emergence of me. Who am I and what am I doing here? I find that during

the process of unraveling me, I am finding you. In every brush stroke, in every photograph enlarged on the screen; I feel a part of us. There is an ever incomprehensible, expanding "IT" that is beyond the words that define. I feel a range of memories and emotions that range from before I was born to when I am no longer here. I feel what it is to be eternal. I feel what it means to be connected to other human beings. The abstract works are an expression of the feeling of timelessness. Work that has photographs of human subjects are the representation of Soul as it becomes a form and inhabits a body. The collages that have images of nature, foliage and animals, are an outgrowth of the overflowing of visual memory of experiences in the country. The reality that there is no separation of "them" and us is ever present in my mind. In the country I lived in the woods. That area is still dominated by woods and farms.

or a document from that time frame. This is the area of dark, tremendous pain. Learning to see in the dark. How do you communicate if you can't read? How do you find your way? The abstracted images, the outlines of transparent beings, the circular energy, and the rays of force that emerge beyond visibility are indications of awareness. Just as we cannot see most of the electromagnetic spectrum, we cannot see the past, the future. We can feel it. We can feel the effects of UV rays, we can see laser if it is beamed through a ruby. Sometimes it takes an extra step, another form of matter to conduct or access light. In this time that we live, we have access to new technologies, new levels of communication at a faster rate, with greater accuracy. We still have great disasters. The photographic collages began to evolve into three-dimensional forms as if a fire or a war had occurred and a city was rebuilt with more information and advanced technology. The boundaries of the city have been expanded.

My work is the culmination of history, original technique, methods, equipment, theory, concepts, etcetera merged within the newness and context of this era. Although the technique of painting comes from many eras, they are fused with the culture and subject matter and images of today. Martins, (1998) further states that, "New York City Ballet has already grown generations of dancers. While some of our principals danced for Balanchine, most company members never knew him. But they know his beliefs; they know his teaching, they know his ballets.... *Serenade* was the first ballet Balanchine made for his new American company more than fifty years ago. We still present it, and fifty years from now we will be performing it still." In this scenario, I find the essence of what I have learned. Change is inevitable. The most significant influence and techniques from master painters and photographers tend to fade in future generations. Change in medium, technique or subject does not necessarily mean a change from fine art to commercialism. Oil to acrylic does not mean "less or inferior" no more than the comparison of "traditional film to digital photography". In reference to the blending of tradition with the present, Peter Martins goes on to say, "I keep looking; I keep opening the door. It would be the antithesis of Balanchine's belief to close the door on the new, to exclude the rest of the world only to polish Balanchine. Dance exists in the present." The same is true for the art as we create it. Regardless of how long it is preserved, the artist creates art in the present.

The study of Sacred Geometry is a new term used for an ancient practice. The foundation of the initial designs of my work stem from the study of mandalas. The idea of the circle, its meaning and use varies by culture.

Overall, truth in art is possible when we are true to ourselves. Are we creating art to please a patron? Sometimes that is necessary, especially when we have to feed a family. It may

not simply be art for the sake of it, but it is a true necessity of the love one has for family. When we can display samples of work and connect with people who desire to purchase that work or something similar, Since I have come “full circle” without an answer, I will conclude with the quotes from the Van Camp(1997) translation of Tolstoy, which say all that needs to be said. ***“In order correctly to define art, it is necessary, first of all, to cease to consider it as a means to pleasure and to consider it as one of the conditions of human life. Viewing it in this way we cannot fail to observe that art is one of the means of intercourse between man and man.”*** I think that the following quotation defines what I try to convey through art. Tolstoy states quite clearly that, ***“We are accustomed to understand art to be only what we hear and see in theaters, concerts, and exhibitions, together with buildings, statues, poems, novels....But all this is but the smallest part of the art by which we communicate with each other in life. All human life is filled with works of art of every kind- from cradlesong, jest, mimicry, the ornamentation of houses, dress, and utensils, up to church services, buildings, monuments, and triumphal processions. It is all artistic activity. So that by art, in the limited sense of the word, we do not mean all human activity transmitting feelings, but only that part which we for some reason select from it and to which we attach special importance.”*** Whether the art that is created is a reflection of what is visible on invisible it remains a part of the human condition. We may seek truth but many of us may not recognize it if we look outside of ourselves.

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